‘You’re not big, you’re just in Asia’: Expatriate embodiment and emotional experiences of size in Singapore

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This article brings together work on privileged migration with critical geographical work on body size. In uniting these areas together I focus on the role of embodiment within expatriate experiences of migration to Singapore. I argue that despite a developing body of critical work on migration, this work has failed to explore embodied experiences of size. To counter this gap, this research demonstrates the importance of recognising how sized narratives and experiences are shaped through gendered migration and the need to explore the multiplicity of experiences of women in different places of the city. Drawing upon empirical research with expatriate women in Singapore I advance work within critical geographies of body size by presenting original work that challenges dominant and medicalised understandings of fatness as inherently bad. Furthermore, I contribute to the growing area of work that places emphasis on the subjective nature of size through recognition of work on migration. In this article I explore how migration was embodied and discussed through size, firstly by looking at how women discussed losing their sense of identity. Secondly, the temporal and spatial embeddedness of size. Finally, how women rejected and resisted dominant discourses through humour and indifference.

Keywords: Body size; migration; Singapore; gender; embodiment; expatriates

Introduction

While work on migration has, and continues to, capture significant academic and popular interest, there is notable absence of a particular group from analysis - privileged migrants. Such absence mirrors the assumptions made about privileged migration, that it is unquestioned and unbounded, and by doing so echoes much of the colonial narratives that take privilege – and with it whiteness – as taken for granted (Fechter and Walsh 2010). There is however a growing body of research concerned with exploring privileged migration, recognising the importance of understanding how postcolonial relations are reconfigured, challenged or augmented through migration. This work has explored the intersection of migration, identity and privilege in multiple ways including: gender (Leonard 2010, Walsh

2011), whiteness (Fechter 2005, Leonard 2010, McDowell 2008), the professional classes (Cranston 2017), lifestyle migration (Benson and O'reilly 2009, Botterill 2016) and childhood (Fechter and Korpela 2016). While much of this work has attended to the relative absence of privileged migrants to research, few have explore the embodied and material aspects of migration – specifically that of body size.

In this article I explore the experiences of privileged migrants in Singapore focusing on body size to show how body size matters within narratives of migration. I demonstrate how the intersections of identity markers such as gender, ethnicity, class, nationality, age and body size are infused with varying degrees of power bound up in the history of colonialism and its contemporary versions. The research is grounded within theoretical work on embodiment developed from feminist geographers' engagements with the body (Longhurst and Johnston 2014) and critical geographical work on fatness (Hopkins 2008). Feminist contributions to work on embodiment provide a means through which to explore the multiple ways subjects are made through movements (Silvey 2004). As Gorman-Murray (2009, 444) suggests, migration is an intently embodied process, 'Migrants are not "disembodied actors"; sensual corporeality, intimate relationality and other facets of emotional embodiment also suffuse relocation processes'. Experiences are not constructed entirely through discursive practices but the mutual relationship between discourses, materiality and spatiality in ways that are complex and interconnected (Little and Leyshon 2003, Nast and Pile 1998). This provides an important and new approach to understanding migration that has not been developed in research on transnationalism elsewhere by exploring body size.

Critical geographical work emphasises the spatially contingent nature of body size. This work suggests that bodies are not purely biological and epidemiological phenomenon, but situated within specific temporal and spatial power discourses (Colls and Evans 2009). As

such ‘obesity cannot be divorced from the gendered, raced and classed political economy from which it emerges’ (McPhail 2009, 1022). This work has revealed the extent to which medicalised discourses and power relations in the ‘West’ assert essentialised ‘facts’ about fat bodies, and how they are subsequently governed and disciplined spatially and temporally (Lupton 2013, Colls and Evans 2009). Work of this nature has significant implications to exploring the discursive representation of fat bodies (Longhurst 2005). For example, how social and cultural discourses are able to reproduce particular moral readings of bodies, subsequently legitimising some (thin) bodies, while constructing other (fat) bodies as deviant (Evans 2006). Other work has demonstrated the multiple ways that discourses surrounding body size and weight loss are embedded in white, heteronormative and feminine constructions of acceptable bodies and lifestyles (Besio and Marusek 2014).

The emphasis of poststructuralist approaches has been significant to questioning and challenging medicalised and ‘common sense’ discourses that underpin contemporary work surrounding obesity. However, some critics have suggested that an overreliance on discourse may marginalise embodied and material experiences of size (Evans 2006). Therefore, it is essential that work focuses on the importance of the materiality of the lived experience. As Shilling (1991) suggests:

> Bodies may be surrounded by and perceived through discourses, but they are *irreducible* to discourse. The body needs to be grasped as an actual material phenomenon which is both affected by and *affects* knowledge and society’ (p. 662, italics in original)

Yet, despite the prevalence of discussions of ‘obesity’ in many societies, several authors have suggested that there has been limited engagement with fat people themselves (Kirkland 2008, Fikkan and Rothblum 2012). In response, recent work on fatness within geography has sought to value the voices of fat people and explore the spatially contingent nature of size. In her study of British women clothes shopping, Colls (2006, 534) focuses on the ‘lived realities

of fat subjectivity' to argue that, rather than quantifiable, body size is experienced and narrated through multiple, flexible and contradictory experiences.

In this article I demonstrate how body size is lived by expatriate women in Singapore, focussing specifically on emotional experiences. The research develops literature in this area by examining the intersections of work on privileged migration and geographical work on size. This is done by exploring the experiences of identity, places, emotions and resilience. Throughout the empirical analysis I illustrate how size was discursively produced and embodied within the women's narratives of size and Singapore. My empirical findings highlight the flexible and fluid nature of sized identities and the intersections between emotions, places and size. Consequently, women's sized experiences are not fixed but situated within migration networks that are inherently gendered and shaped by dominant discourses regarding fatness and women's bodies. In the final section I account for women's agency within this and how ideas regarding body size were resisted and challenged.

Privileged migration and identity

Cranston (2017) suggests in her work on British migrants in Singapore that the term 'expatriate' is often used by Westerners abroad to differentiate themselves from *other* migrants. Its often unquestioned use by white western migrants is not unproblematic but indicative of its racial, colonial and nationalistic undertones. In this article I focus on a group of migrants who self-defined as expatriates but who can be broadly considered privileged migrants in that they are 'individuals whose migration experiences are rarely characterized by economic or political hardship' (Croucher 2012, 1). While the term expatriate is often used without question, it is clearly problematic, not least because the majority of black and Asian migrants are not usually defined as such (instead the less-favourable term 'immigrant' is used instead) (Rogaly and Taylor 2010). However, as those working on privileged migration have

noted, there is a need to interrogate such categories and explore how migrant identities intersect within the social, cultural, political and economic contexts in which they are situated. Such work draws into light the multiple ways that class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age – and as I argue – body size, are pertinent to how we contextualise migration to 'reveal how racial hierarchies and power inequalities persist, as well as how they are being reconfigured and challenged' (Fechter and Walsh 2010, 1198).

It is important to acknowledge the importance of understanding how embodied identities are continually constructed in relation to the particular local histories of a place, and as such are always in a process of production in relation to specific contexts (Bonnett 2000). For the purposes of this study work on race and ethnicity and in particular whiteness are important. Within postcolonial settings like Singapore, what it is to embody a particular identity marker such as whiteness, is (re)configured continuously through multiple asymmetrical power relations, of which the history of British colonial rule is a significant factor. Research in this area is helpful in order to explore how whiteness is far from essential or stable, but 'remade, invented and inherited' (Leonard 2008, 48). As Leonard (2010) suggests, for white expatriates, migration may mean experiencing their identities in new ways in relation to the place of settlement, its history and the people around them. Furthermore, it is often only through relational interactions with others that it becomes visible and embodies particular meanings, often through the positioning of others at its margins (McDowell 2008). However, as Omi (2001) highlights, the economic, political and cultural structures of inequality which are often deepened through migration, can cement understandings of difference along racial lines rather than challenge them. That is not to say that racialised differences are the most significant factors shaping how difference is constructed, but that experiences are based on the intersections of identity markers, and the historical, political and cultural contexts with which these coalesce.

The interactions between people in places have also been noted as central to identity formation, for example, the role of 'contact zones' as places within cities where different people are brought together (Pratt 1992). Within the global city, difference becomes proximate, and otherness materialises through social, temporal and spatial, relations and interactions. Global cities are often recognised as a particular space within which 'social collisions' occur because spatial mobility enables different groups to come together (Willis 2010, 139). Within work on expatriates, Cranston (2016) has extended this idea, noting how the global mobility industry produces knowledge about cultural interactions and what is considered normative encounters and thus normative expatriate identities. She argues that while scholars have focused on how identities are formed through encounters with others, identities are often developed through representations and discursively produced knowledge prior to encounters that produce habitual ways of being. In what follows I demonstrate how body size is central to the subjective nature of identity formation and how this shapes narratives of interaction with others. I begin with a review of the methodology.

Methodology

This research was carried out over a period of six months in Singapore between September 2012 and March 2013 with women who self-identified as expatriates. My research approach was developed through feminist engagements with bodies and emerging work in Fat Studies, in order to develop a methodological approach that values and makes present the experiences of women, placing an emphasis on their subjective experiences (Hardill 2004). In total 45 in-depth interviews were carried out and one focus group with five women. Participants were recruited through a research advertisement on social media, at expatriate social events and snowballing of contacts. Participants varied in regards to their nationality, age, ethnicity and length of expatriation, however, 25 were British and 36 identified as white. I suggest that this

is likely to be the result of assumptions regarding what it means to be an expatriate, the history of colonial British rule and the fact that I myself am white and British. Furthermore, occupying such a subject position meant that my respondents often assumed I shared the same view as them, which was not necessarily the case.

Rather than speak with women that identified as fat, I spoke with women from a range of body sizes. My intention in doing so was to explore the range of ways that size is experienced and narrated, not only for those with fat bodies but a range of material sizes. As I argue elsewhere (Lloyd and Hopkins 2015, 3), 'there is a difference between the issues faced by those that may be considered 'normatively' sized and may *feel* fatter, and those who are physically much larger and as such must deal with a range of issues regarding their size'. This is not to say that one group's views are more important, but that I acknowledge that many of the women's slenderness and 'thin privilege' meant that certain embodied aspects of size were not acknowledged or experienced (Donaghue and Clemitshaw 2012). Furthermore, Singapore provided an important context to explore body size and identity because, as Isono, Watkins, and Lian (2009) highlight, rapid economic development has coincided with weight-gain by Singaporeans and a rise in eating disorders. As such, weight bias and medicalised understandings of fatness as bad are seen to justify fat-phobic comments that were viewed as commonplace.

Migration and identity

For many of the women, most of whom had moved because of their partner's jobs, migration to Singapore appeared to impact how they understood and talked about their own sense of identity and self-worth. This appeared to also intersect with their experiences of their bodies. It was clear that for many, body size and the emplaced nature of embodiment had implications to how women experienced their new subjectivities within the context of

migration. Many of the women discussed how migration marked a significant change in the way that they understood and narrated body image and body size. I begin with a quote from Beth who summarises some of these changes.[1]:

> Just being a big clumpy Western woman in a world which seems to be populated by tiny, petite, beautiful, perfectly groomed [people]. […]I may never be in this world [Singapore], but I'm an average looking person, acceptable, nobody runs off screaming when they see my face. Whereas here [Singapore], umm, you're different, you *know* you're different, you're being measured by a different set of standards and however much you say people aren't thinking about it [appearances] – actually they are. They're talking about it all the time. You know you see the discourse in the popular press, all the sort of bitching about appearances. In the UK it's the same, people *are* commenting on people that walk by. And in the UK I just don't give a toss, I just shrug it off, because you know, because at the end of the day I know who I am there. But I don't here. (Beth, 46, UK)

The quote from Beth suggests that through migration, the way that she experiences her body has changed. Not only has she transgressed a national border, but also social and cultural boundaries in the way that she now experiences her body size. This crossing of borders exists not only physically, but also by being situated across discourses in the ways that knowledge about bodies is understood. This discussion emphasises the power of normalising strategies. As Bordo (1993) suggests, we are surrounded by normalising messages through homogenous projections of what is considered to be a normal – and thus acceptable – type of body, with limited room for the diversity of cultural difference. Beth's desire to feel normal highlights the ways that biopower is able to regulate understandings of what constitutes a normal body through continued surveillance of other bodies and constant bombardment with images, discussions and projections of the perfect female body (Huxley 2007). Although there may be pressure on women to look a certain way in their home countries, migration shapes the ways that bodies are experienced, not necessarily through

[1] All names have been changed.

new discourses but new ways of thinking about these discourses and experiences. Despite Beth's suggestion that she can 'shrug it off in the UK' as a resistance to normalising strategies, an unwillingness to participate in practices to alter her body, and as a coping strategy (Colls 2006), it is very apparent throughout the interview that not feeling like she fits in in Singapore is upsetting for her.

Several women reflected on how loss of identity was embodied and experienced through migration. Many reflected on the way that migration contributed to them losing a sense of their identity, the following quotes from Cassie and Maria are a typical example of this:

> You actually give up everything that was part of your identity. Your career, going to work and having the routine and having a purpose, and suddenly that's all taken away, the husband continues as usual – 7 o'clock out the door, […]. Whereas for women I think that's all gone. So you um, yeah it's just like everything has been ripped away. And it's like now what have I got left? Where do I start?
> (Cassie, 50, Australia)

> I was struggling with my kind of identity […]. All the things that I felt that were my identity. I don't know, independence, working, or studying or always doing something for myself in my career. […] I had this lack of identity, like who am I now?
> (Maria, 30, Mexico)

Cassie and Maria suggest that migration has fundamental implications to how they experience their identity in Singapore, which was echoed by many of the women I spoke with, particularly for women who were no longer engaged in formal employment. For many, migration to Singapore and giving up jobs in the their home countries meant that how they understood their identity was in a state of flux, where they now needed to embark on new practices in order to construct their sense of identity. I argue that this sense of loss of identity, through migration, is embodied and experienced in multiple ways. By focusing on body size,

I explore here the gendered nature of expatriate migration and the everyday emotional implications of it.

The gendered nature of expatriate migration shaped how many women experienced a loss of sense of identity and for some this was played out through discourses and narratives regarding body size. Body size is an important lens through which to understand the multiple networks of power that shape gendered experiences in different places. Body size is not the only factor at play here, but as the following extract from my interview with Jane and Anita makes clear, structural differences that are inherently gendered play a key role. Here Jane is discussing her need to 'get in shape' when moving to Singapore:

> Jane: So right now because I went home to Canada for the summer and we moved and all the stress of moving. Now I'm getting back into my zone again. And I think it's control.
>
> Jenny: Yeah?
>
> Jane: I think that's what it's about, it's about, I have nothing else.
>
> Anita: You can't work.
>
> Jane: I couldn't work, you know, I can't do anything here, but I can control that [fitness and eating].
>
> Jenny: Yeah
>
> Jane: You know, and I think that's what it's about. You know me [to Anita], I just, I need to be in charge and in control.
>
> (Jane, 43, Canada and Anita, age unknown, UK)

In this discussion, Jane explicitly states that for her, going to the gym and being able to change her body shape is essential for her ability to have some form of control over her life. Earlier in the discussion Jane stated: 'the gym is my thing'. Going to the gym and working out afford Jane the ability to maintain control over her body – one of the few aspects of her life that she believes she is able to control. Throughout the interview Jane and Anita discuss how the gym and working out are a means to regain control and meaning within their lives since they have moved. Such practices echo Bordo's (2003) suggestion of anorexia as the

embodiment of socio-cultural discourses in the West surrounding thinness as the ideal and morally acceptable body shape. I am not suggesting that Jane has anorexia, but that practices such as working out at the gym and controlling the food she consumes, affords Jane the meaning and control to her life she feels she has lost through migration (Evans, Rich, and Holroyd 2004). I argue that Jane recognises body work as a means to control her life due to the increasing proliferation of moral discourses surrounding fatness and thinness. As such, Jane considers body work practices as her way to gain control due to her absorption of representations of thinness as a demonstration of control, and the ability to achieve it as success (Segal and Blatt 1994).

It is not only migration in general which impacts the women's sense of identity, the context of Singapore is intricately tied to the women's experiences. Anita states later that 'when you're a dependant, you're not really technically a person'. She is referring here specifically to the type of visa she is on (a dependent pass tied to her husband's visa). It is clear that Singapore is an active context to which these experiences are grounded within. Structural differences in regards to visa access and rights thread themselves through the language the women use to articulate their experiences of migration and how they think about themselves – as dependent. Several women reflected that going to the gym and body practices were therefore a way in which to regain control and agency within their life, but also mange feelings of guilt for not working. This is summarised by Jane when she states:

> when you're an expat woman, like say you're starting over again and you lose your identity as well, there's nothing left to validate *you*. Or maybe before you had your job, now your kids grown older and you don't really have your kids anymore, your husband's moving forward in his career. You just, you don't feel like a person anymore and you start questioning like, your mortality. […] I have been following my husband around and starting over, as soon as I get my hands into something it's like torn away and I start again. So today I had a job interview so I'll probably start working soon, which is great. But in three more years or however long that will be torn away from me. But this

> [control over her body]. You can never take it away from me. And I think for a lot of women it's something, to somehow validate you.
> (Jane, 43, Canada)

It is clear the migration to Singapore impacts the ways that women experience their identities. In this sense, the intersections of structural inequality which mean that women are often unable to work, and dominant ideas regarding women's bodies, thinness and control, are interwoven into their narratives of migration and how the women understand, challenge and construct ideas about themselves and their emotional experiences of their bodies.

Bodies, places and emotions

Work on transnational migration has highlighted how women are often considered central to managing the emotional wellbeing of their families (Willis and Yeoh 2000). Discussions of emotion work have often focused on women's unpaid work within the domestic sphere and their role in maintaining the home and family while away (Yeoh, Huang, and Willis 2000). Within the global city, whereas (expatriate) men's work is often tied to the public and economically viable domain, women are often recognised as important only within the domestic realm (Weland 1997). Feminist work in this area has emphasised the significance of emotions in shaping transnational experiences, and the need for emotional work in managing culture shock (Walsh 2012). However, few studies have recognised the emotional implications of migration to experiences of body size or the places and spaces within cities that women interact with beyond the home.

In her review of *Bodies out of bounds: fatness and transgression* (Braziel and LeBesco 2001), Colls (2002) proposes the idea of 'emotional size' as a way to explore fatness as felt. Rather than quantifying bodies as healthy or unhealthy, emotional size provides an alternative explanation for the way that body size is experienced differently in different spatial, social and cultural contexts (Davidson and Milligan 2004). Or as one participant

stated: ‘you’re not big, you’re just in Asia’ (Sharon, 45, UK). In this section I demonstrate the ways emotions, within transnational spaces are, implicated in the processes of embodiment, and the dynamic ways that bodies and materiality shape our experiences of bodily boundaries in ways that are ‘full of contradiction’ (Banister, 1999, p. 520).

For many of the women I spoke with, learning to manage their emotions in relation to their bodies and body size was an important aspect of adapting to living in Singapore. Emotional experiences of body size had significant implications for how they experienced migration. The following extract by Anne highlights the relational, spatial and temporal implications of migration to how she emotionally embodies her size:

> Anne: I felt – like – a –whale – when I came here, I did, I felt like a whale. I felt enormous. I lived in the heart of business district where they were all really posh and you know and they all looked immaculate. And I didn’t feel immaculate, I didn’t feel nice. […] I think when I first came and everybody was so tiny, and I thought *well I’m so huge,* and I thought *well I’m nearly 50 for god’s sake Anne shut up*. *You’re not* built like them you’re not Asian *you’re not* built like them just deal with it. And um I started doing lot of cycling with my friends and I got a new bike for Christmas and now I’m out there on my bike pedalling and I know I’m exercising I know I’m lot fitter than I use to be. It might not be shown on the scales all the time.
> (Anne, 49, Scotland)

Many of the women I spoke with discussed physical social spaces which had implications to the way they experienced their body size or made them feel conscious of their embodiment. Several participants discussed how they became more self-conscious in the Central Business District, for example around Raffles, Orchard Road and City Hall MRT, and linked this to the prevalence of younger, ‘immaculate’ women (both Asian and expatriate). It became clear throughout many of these discussions, that body size was not just about size but the perception of it. It was often suggested that the professional class’s style also affected

how the women felt about themselves as both larger but also less 'immaculate'. The idea that body size is spatially contingent and relational is discussed further by Jessica:

> Like if I am in Orchard Road and I'm walking around in Paragon right. I look terrible you see. Fat! White! Because I'm much bigger. Whereas if I was to go near Woodlands out near the American school no one looks at me twice because it's full of rather larger American women and because Woodlands is a sort of HDB [Housing Department Board] kind of hub type place. There are a lot of very big Malay women and big Indian women (Jessica, 42, New Zealand)

It is clear from this extract that body size and space are significant. Additionally Jessica suggests that ethnicity, class and nationality are important. For Anne and Jessica they appear to experience their identities and feel 'out of place' due to the intersections of fatness and whiteness where their bodies are marked as 'other' in the context of Singapore. It is clear that this is not only about their own bodies but their perception of legitimate bodies and classes in certain spaces of the city. Paragon shopping mall is located on Orchard Road, a central shopping area in Singapore known for its high end and designer shops and a certain 'expatriate sense of place' (Beaverstock 2011, 247). In opposition, Woodlands is located in the North of Singapore very close to Malaysia and is considered one of the 'heartland' areas. Based on my own observations and conversations, Jessica is hinting at the dominance of expatriate and Chinese Singaporean women in Orchard Road as opposed to the 'big' Malay and Indian women that populate the Woodlands area. It is clear therefore, that she experiences her body size in relation to other women's bodies, both to their size but also their ethnicity and class. Her whiteness is made more apparent through experiencing herself as 'fat', and through recognition that the people that populate Orchard Road (in comparison to Woodlands) come from different classed backgrounds. As such, she feels that she 'look[s] terrible' and is made to stand out as 'fat' and 'white'.

Another – rather different way – that highlights the intersections of emotions, embodiment and space was discussed by Emma. During the interview Emma spoke of a difficult period when first moving to Singapore and having several miscarriages. During this discussion she talked about how different spaces shaped her embodied experiences, and significantly, her own problems with conception and experiences of miscarriage. In particular, Emma suggested that she would avoid Tanglin Mall, (a shopping mall popularly understood as dominated by expatriates) because 'everywhere you look there's pregnant women'. In her work on pregnant bodies, Longhurst (2000, 455) discusses the 'complex corporeographies' of pregnant bodies, as sites where 'gender, hegemony, power and performativity may be mapped in relation to pregnant embodiment'. Throughout she discusses how pregnant performances construct and disrupt gendered discourses surrounding pregnancy and how certain corporeal practices become normative. For Emma, her own mobility is modified in relation to her recognition of the particular spaces – Tanglin Mall – as sites of normative performances of pregnant embodiment. Therefore, following from Butler's (1990, p. 136) assertion that gendered identities are 'sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means', it is my argument that certain spaces are also mapped in relation to particular gendered performances, and thus shape and are shaped by imagined geographies of what those spaces represent. For Emma, Tanglin Mall represents a space marked by pregnant embodiment, and as such she is made to feel her own corporeality, through the absence of size (a baby bump), in relation to other pregnant bodies.

From many of the discussions it was clear that body size and space intersected in ways that influenced how the women experienced their corporeality. For many, clothes shopping made them *feel* fatter in relation to the numerical sizing used, or comments from shop assistants. For others like Anne and Jessica, the CBD influenced their experiences of feeling 'like a whale' (Anne) or 'terrible' (Jessica), when they experienced themselves in

relation to other women. Furthermore, it is clear that such experiences were often compounded through the intersection of size and ethnicity where women felt their bodies stood out. Such reflections highlight the emotional significance of body size and its flexible and fluid nature. It is commonly acknowledged that bodily boundaries can become smaller and larger through the physical distribution of adipose tissue, i.e. through dieting and exercising – the premise that a large amount of (anti)obesity discourse is based upon. However, I argue that our emotional interactions with spaces and people around us can become embodied in a way that implicates our size as felt, so that there are multiple ways that size can be lived and experienced. Like emotions, our body size is dependent on the socio-cultural spaces that we find ourselves in. How body size is experienced can change throughout the day, as people move around the city in relation to different places and people, and the practices we engage in.

Coming-to-terms

In her work on expatriates in Dubai, Walsh (2012, p.57) suggests that a 'shift in the discursive register' of the emotions can change migrant subjectivities over time. She argues that it is important to recognise the situatedness of emotions and how these alter over the period of expatriation. For many of the women I spoke with, body size was discussed as temporal. Prominent in the discussions was the immediate impact that migration had to experiences of body size and the suggestion that over time some were able to *come-to-terms* with feeling larger. In addition, many of the women discussed the significance that ageing had on their body size, both in terms of the materiality of their bodies and their ability to negotiate these changes. I use coming-to-terms to implicate the emotional and temporal within embodied experiences as significant to the negotiation of bodily matter and identity during migration. By coming-to-terms I suggest that women are able – to some degree – to emotionally manage their embodied experiences, and as such are active agents in their

feelings towards their bodies over time after migration. Paradoxically, coming-to-terms also suggests a tolerance rather than acceptance of body size, one that is always mediated to some extent by dominant discourses surrounding fatness.

For many of the women, coming-to-terms with their size was not only a result of the initial experiences of migration, but also in relation to their own experiences of ageing. Both these factors are suggested in the quote by Anne above. Clearly for some, migration to Singapore forced many of the women to think (and feel) about their bodies in ways they may not have done so previously. However, in addition to migration, age and ageing shaped many of the women's experiences of their body size and there is clear scope to develop work on the intersections of body size and ageing. Again, what is important is the way that emotions are implicated and how feelings and wellbeing can shape a person's sized experience of migration. Many of the statements about body size made by participants started with 'when I first arrived' (Susan, 40, UK), and suggested that over time they had learnt to adapt to negotiating their body size in a different way, much like many other adaptions when migrating. Consider the following example:

> Maria: In the past it would affect me to be like *oh I'm XL* but now I'm like pff that's me and what else?
> Jenny: Why do you think it doesn't affect you so much now?
> Maria: I think that it's a change of mind set
> (Maria, 30, Mexico).

> Carly: You know when I first got here it was very. I was a bit more conscious then.. Whereas the more that, the longer you've been here and the more that you hear about it [comments about bodies] you sort of think it just happens so.
> (Julie, 40, UK)

Maria and Julie highlight the ways that how it feels to be a certain size can develop over time, and that emotions can shape both experiences of size and those of Singapore. Although many

of the discussions regarding body size were dominated with homogenous accounts of fatness as bad, there were moments within which these ideologies were disrupted and challenged. Many suggested that through time they acclimatised to living in Singapore (and feeling bigger), whereas others discussed how their 'mind set', feeling fitter or overall feelings of happiness resulted in positive embodied experiences regardless – as Anne states – if it is 'shown on the scales'. Happiness and sense of self-worth appeared to have positive implications to how many of the women felt about their size. In the following section I focus on this point by highlighting some of the ways that the women subverted and challenged dominate ideas surrounding body size.

Resilience and humour

Research into privileged migration has highlighted the range of strategies that women employ to overcome some of the challenges of transnational migration (Yeoh and Khoo 1998).
I turn now to some of the contradictory ways that the women experienced body size, and moments of resilience. I have argued throughout that by exploring body size as emotional we can recognise that it is fluid and flexible. Indeed, how body size and shape is experienced, changes from day-to-day and in different places and times. This article has focused to a large extent on the ways that women experienced their size negatively. I do not wish to suggest that women are passive recipients, and so focus now on tactics of resilience.

One way, that women discussed dealing with their experiences of body size upon migration to Singapore was through the use of humour. Migration to Singapore meant that many of the women experienced their body size in a new way that was often upsetting. The following shopping account was typical of the stories that I heard with over half recounting something similar:

> Lauren: When I was trying to lose my pregnancy weight. We were in Singapore already I was trying to get clothes. I said, and I asked the shop attendant if they have my size.

> ‘*Maybe but it’s probably XL’*. ‘WHAT?’, ‘*You maybe want to go to that the other shop because maybe we don’t have this*’. ‘*Can’t you just try can’t I just try maybe?*’ and that makes me maybe a little upset at the beginning, or when they, when they say ‘*oh maybe we don’t have your size because you look big*’ ‘*what do you mean I’m big*?’ [Getting louder][…] I let it go, anyway whatever. I mean I have enough confidence to say, I’m fit I feel fit, I feel healthy. I don’t care about your opinion and I think you’re just too damn skinny [laughs]!
> (Lauren, Indonesia, age undisclosed).

Many of the women I spoke with experienced being told they were ‘big’ or ‘too fat’, and reflected that these comments had implications for their experiences of Singapore and their own bodies. Some suggested that bluntness and receiving comments about their bodies from strangers was part of Singaporean culture, and therefore something they had to get used to. Isono, Watkins, and Lian (2009) discuss how within Singapore, commenting on a person’s size and shape is widely accepted. They suggest that, as Singapore has become a superpower, ideas around body size have changed through an adoption of ‘Western values’ (p. 128) resulting in a preference for thinness.

Cultural differences in Singapore regarding how people talk about bodies was summarised by Christina:

> Christina: They’re [Singaporeans] just so direct I mean I was just so upset [when asked if she was pregnant] because I was so fragile at the time. I laugh at it now because I’m used to how direct they can be
> (Christina, 46, UK)

Many of the women suggested that humour was one way to deal with comments from strangers about their body size. Some of the women recounted strategies that they used to challenge and deal with the comments made. Take for example the following two stories:

> I was with a friend not too long ago and you know, she said. We were in this shop, and this woman, and she’s a fairly big girl. And this lady had come over and said ‘*I’m sorry*

> *but we don't have, I don't think we have that in your size'*. And um I mean my friends a corker with these things, she'll just say: *'oh well that's good because you're clothes are mingin anyway'* [laughing] '*you obviously don't have anything to fit me or anyone*', and I nearly wet myself. [2] [3] She was like *'yeah come on'* [let's leave]. And I mean this woman's face she was just staring at us as we walked out of the shop. She couldn't believe, she didn't have an answer for it. And I was like '*wow that's a good one'*. And she, her other one is er '*yeah because you know we [expatriates] actually have boobs so you probably don't have anything to fit boobs'*
> (Carly, 40, UK)

> I long since gave up the idea that I can shop for clothes properly here. Erm, if I think there's half a chance that I can find something that will fit me. I will go into a shop and say '*have you anything that will fit my big bottom'*. Because when I first moved here, what was it, 6 years ago now? I was going into places and saying, *'have you got any shorts, have you got any trousers'* and they'd say '*no we've got nothing for you you've got big fat bottom',* and that is an experience that at that point.
> (Dawn, 54, UK)

It is clear here that humour was utilised in different ways to respond to negative comments made about their bodies but that this was often produced through situating Singaporean women as 'other'. To clarify, I am referring to these comments as 'negative comments' because that was the way my participants interpreted them. As such, being told they were 'fat' or had a 'big bottom' was considered to be rude and/or upsetting and thus required some amount of response through which to deal with: first, feeling upset or angry. Second, the cultural difference in Singapore within which commenting on a stranger's body is more acceptable (Isono, Watkins, and Lian 2009).

Westcott and Vazquez Maggio (2016) have shown how humour is used by professional migrants during the development of friendships abroad and how it can overcome some of the barriers of developing social relationships. There is also work that has explored humour as a mechanism for perpetuating dominant discourses regarding heteronormative

[2] A 'corker' is something that is excellent or good. In this case a funny person.
[3] 'Mingin' is British slang for something that is disgusting or gross.

identities (Kehily and Nayak 1997). Within research on body size, humour has often been explored as a mechanism to shame and oppress (Gullage 2012). However, work has also examined 'the use of humour in response to experiences of exclusion and marginalisation to be a useful device in helping people to manage specific social situations' (Hopkins 2012, 1241). The two examples above highlight the way that humour was mobilised as a strategy of resilience in different ways.

In the first extract, Carly discusses an occasion where her friend responded to being told that the clothes in the shop wouldn't fit her. Her response – saying the clothes in the shop were 'mingin' – highlights how humour can be used to challenge everyday experiences of fat shaming, and a rejection of the shame directed at her body through redirecting it towards the clothes in the shop. It is clear from Carly's comment: 'her other one', is that Carly's friend has established a variety of devices through which to challenge and respond to negative comments aimed at her body, what Kirkland (2008, 410) defines as 'redirecting shame':

> Redirecting shame is what I call verbal responses to ill treatment. The technique is similar to moral instruction in that it is situational and interactive, but it is less ''legal'' in the sense of being less about teaching an antagonist the proper way to evaluate another person and more about showing off a new-found confidence in what NAAFA members called ''snappy comebacks.' […]. This technique involves moving shame and social disapproval back onto the person who initiated the situation and may bring in onlookers on the fat person's side.

In the situation described by Carly, shame is redirected at the clothing store. Stories like this highlight, as Kirkland argues, the mechanisms by which people can resist and challenge dominant discourses regarding fatness and body size. In responding to the woman in the shop and by Carly re-telling the story to me, we are all involved in acts that stand up to the status-quo of how people of different body sizes are treated. However, I would also argue that these tactics reflect a wider need for women to manage the adjustment to moving to Singapore and

dealing with the different social and cultural norms where these comments are normalised. Secondly, Carly's friend's second 'comeback': '*yeah because you know we actually have boobs so you probably don't have anything to fit boobs*', reflects wider discourses regarding how sexuality, ethnicity, othering and difference are maintained and mobilised through body size discourses to position expatriate women in opposition to Singaporean women. While these comments were used as strategies to manage their experiences of their bodies it is clear that many of the women use classed and racialised discourses to construct Asian women as 'other'. Furthermore, while many considered it rude to receive comments from Singaporeans about their own bodies, this did not prevent them speaking to me or others and making judgements that 'other' women's bodies were "too damn skinny" or don't "have boobs" (see Lloyd, *forthcoming* for a discussion).

In focusing on body size the complexities of migration are highlighted. While on one hand these stories reflect tactics to challenge fat-phobia, on the other, these narratives show some the highly problematic constructions of Singaporean women that echo colonial narratives of the 'predatory' Asian woman (Yeoh and Huang 2010). Indeed there are clear similarities between colonial narratives and contemporary discussions of different groups of women which are maintained through racialised, classed and gendered discussions (Fechter 2010). Furthermore, it became clear to me that throughout the research my position as a white British woman meant that my subject position was often assumed. At times this meant women discussing Singaporean women in highly problematic ways due to an assumption I 'knew where they were coming from'. I discuss this further in Lloyd (*forthcoming*).

Another use of humour is highlighted by Dawn (p. 21). Unlike with Carly's friend, Dawn can be seen to use another tactic noted by Thomas et al. (2007, 325) – making fun of myself. Making fun of herself by asking 'have you anything that will fit my big bottom' is a tactic employed by Dawn through which to navigate what could be a potentially negative

experience, by pre-empting the response she will receive in shops. It is clear from Dawn that she has learnt to deal with negative instances over time, and that initially comments were upsetting. As I suggested earlier, Dawn has had to come-to-terms with her body size in Singapore in relation to other bodies and the different cultural context. Using humour has enabled Dawn to become resilient to discourses regarding her body size and from our discussion it seemed as though she no longer felt concerned about being/feeling 'bigger'. It is clear from these extracts that humour is utilised in multiple ways to resist and challenge dominant and oppressive discourses regarding fatness.

Additionally, it became clear from many of the interviews that receiving comments about body size was considered to be a normal aspect of Singaporean culture, one that they had to learn to adapt to: However, for many of the women I spoke with, this was initially an upsetting aspect of the migration process particularly when it highlighted their own concerns regarding body size (although none of the women acknowledged the fact that discussions of women's bodies by expatriates was also commonplace). From several of the interviews it became clear that humour; *redirecting shame, making fun of myself* and *laughing it off,* were important mechanisms through which to challenge and resist negative comments and experiences.

The politics of indifference

A final aspect of resilience that I focus on now is that of indifference and the ambivalent relationship that many women have to their body size (Bondi 2004). Many of the women discussed indifference in relation to their body size. For some, indifference was often shown in the women's responses to my questions about how they experienced body size in Singapore, stating that they didn't really think or care about their body size or appearance:

> Alda: I don't really care [laughs]. I know they have, you know you see people going to work and you just think, oh my God, you know. And I see the mums dropping the kids in the nursery and they're all you know, well-groomed with high heel shoes. And I just think I can't do that really, I don't have time to for that unless I wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning or whatever. So I see how they behave or how they do things but I'm, really because I suppose because of the way I am, I just, I'm the way I am you take it or leave it. I don't cope well with peer pressure in that sense I just do my own thing
> (Alda, 36, Portugal)

For many, this type of questioning incited a lengthy discussion regarding body size and often bodily dissatisfaction, yet some, like Alda, appeared indifferent. Although Alda is aware that within Singapore there is pressure on women to look a certain way, she doesn't seem interested in worrying about this or responding to discourses ('peer pressure') regarding how women should look. This was a typical response for some of the women I spoke with who either answered it by directly stating that they weren't interested in these pressures, or by answering the question briefly in a blasé manner. This response echoes those of some of the boys and men interviewed in Grogan and Richards' (2002) work. They found that some of their participants were 'not bothered' (p. 227) about their body image or dieting, and attributed this to dominant discourses within which it was not considered masculine to be concerned about body image. In this project I believe that indifference is a reflection of my sampling method and how my research was framed. Rather than focus on recruiting participants that wanted to specifically focus on body size (like many studies within Fat Studies), I spoke to women regarding a range of issues. As such, the focus of the interviews was often determined by the participant. Those that were indifferent (or perhaps uncomfortable), speaking about their body size chose not to focus on this.

Several participants gave brief answers to questions about body size and image. For many of the women body size, fitness and dieting were things they suggested they didn't worry about. This is not to say they were impervious to body size discourses but rather that

they were likely to be ambivalent, and during the interview appeared indifferent and often focused on other aspects of migration or considered body size concerns as trivial. In his work, Gorman-Murray (2013) proposes the idea of 'silent activism'. He focuses on how everyday interactions, rather than overtly political or legal activism, have profound implications for securing rights and challenging dominant understandings of identity – in his case masculinities. Silent activism therefore recognises the importance that everyday relations have to propelling social change. Developing from this, I argue that indifference can act as a form of silent activism that can, to some degree, undermine homogenous gendered discourses regarding body size and women's bodies. While I have argued that body size discourses have significant implications to embodied experiences of migration, so too does indifference. Indifference provides an important opportunity to subvert (anti)obesity discourses, shaping how many women embody experiences of size. In addition, ambivalence highlights women's agency in doing so, regardless of whether or not they mean it to. By being indifferent: for example, not dieting, not weighing themselves, not calorie counting and not talking about the above, lies the potential for women to challenge discourses and improve their wellbeing and feelings of happiness towards themselves, rather than focusing on what for many, appears to be a source of anguish and pain. I argue that in choosing not to talk (in answer to my questions), and indifference to anti-fat discourses, is inherently political but not overtly so.

It could also be argued however that indifference is a luxury afforded to only those that fit within normative understandings of what is considered to be an acceptable body. For many that do not *fit* – both discursively and physically – they are often reminded daily that they *should* care more. It is important to acknowledge that although dominant body size discourses are pervasive, they are not totalising, and there are frequent opportunities to resist, adapt and often ignore them. How we think about, experience, feel and narrate our body size

is dependent on the places we are in, and in the case of migration – an important and often overlooked facet of migrant identity.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the growing area of work concerned with privileged migration, responding to Fechter and Walsh's (2010, p.1198) call for research to 'develop nuanced understandings of these more privileged tiers of movement and to problematise them'. To do so I have attended to the gap in this area by using an embodied approach to migration focused on body size. In particular I have demonstrated how valuing and making space for people's accounts of body size can expand how we understand and theorise migration and the need to critically engage with the intersections of privilege, migration and place. Using empirical evidence from interviews with expatriate women I have explored some of the embodied aspects of migration, asking how body size is relevant to women's lives and how this is spatially constituted within different places and spaces of the city. I began with an interrogation of the gendered nature of expatriate migration and how women's stories were often shaped through feelings of loss of identity, linking this to their conceptualisation of embodiment and body work. Following from Colls (2006, 2004) I demonstrated size as emotional, spatially and temporally contingent, and framed through dominate narratives of fatness. Finally, I focused on resilience, humour and the politics of indifference to argue that there are multiple ways to resist and re-frame how fatness is conceptualised and lived.

Within the context of Singapore I have examined the role of structural forces within women's sense of identity, for example Anita and Jane's sense of being 'dependent' and their need to regain control through body work. Furthermore, I have highlighted the need for migration work to expand geographical analysis on women's everyday lives and look beyond the home to understand the role of spaces of the city in women's experiences. Finally, I have introduced ideas of how humour and indifference are used to challenge anti-fat discourse

aimed at disciplining women's bodies, but also the ways this was linked to particular racialised and sexualised narratives that other Singaporean women.

The broader implications of this work are an exploration of embodied transnationalism and body size, and the need for greater research that engages a critical perspective within different cultural contexts. While the research was conducted in Singapore it has primarily focused on the experiences of 'western' migrants. Geographical approaches to body size are essential for exploring fatness at a range of geographical scales. However, Fat Studies and critical geographies of body size have been dominated by accounts that are defined as Western focused, with few cross-cultural engagements with fatness (Cooper 2009). As such, there is clear scope for greater cross-cultural critical work on fatness and migration and need to theorise size from beyond Anglo-American perspectives. Drawing on the concept of migration and size will allow geographers and scholars beyond the discipline to explore how body size discourses are lived and experienced and open up the opportunities to explore the multiplicity of migrant experiences in new ways.

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